Panel notes development of public-safety apps, need for dialogue to create more

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When Mark Reddish and his fellow volunteer firefighters arrived on scene to render aid to a non-English speaking pregnant woman experiencing pain, they instinctively pulled out their smartphones.

One used an app to track the patient's vital signs while another used his smartphone as a translation tool and Reddish looked up her medications to better understand her medical history.

"Now, we weren't using apps that were necessarily approved by our department or had been vetted, but we were able to give a more effective response and provide better care to our patient," said Reddish, who is a government relations associate with the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO).

Reddish was a speaker during a webinar on public-safety application development that was part of the IWCE Virtual Show and is now available on demand for show registrants (registration is free; enter the Auditorium to access all archived webinars).

The personal scenario Reddish described illustrates how prevalent applications are becoming in the field. Reddish noted that this interest is a major driving force behind the development of other applications, as is the promise of a public-safety broadband network and the transition to other IP-based platforms, such as next-generation 911 .

One emerging application that many police departments are now adopting are body-worn cameras.

Seventy sheriff's deputies in Buncombe County, N.C., will start wearing the cameras in

January . Sheriff Van Duncan said he believes the camera program will help ensure accountability while protecting what can be a fragile relationship with the public.

“Overall, I feel that our relationship with our community here in Buncombe County is very good and very positive,” Duncan said. “I also realize that can turn on a dime. So we’re making use of this technology, looking out ahead seeing what we can do to keep that relationship positive.”

One of the tricky parts is figuring out what to do with all that video, though. Duncan’s office purchased a server capable of 10 terabytes of storage. Video from an incident, such as an officer-involved shooting, automatically would be saved, but the non-incident video will likely be kept for about 45 days.

“Some of this, because it is fairly new technology, is a little bit of trial and error,” Duncan said.

Also, tapping into social-media data offers a range of uses for law enforcement, said Kaethe Beck, managing director for VACCINE within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence at Purdue University . VACCINE stands for Visual Analytics for Command, Control, and Interoperability Environments.

“There’s a number of ways that you can use social media in order to determine what people are saying about you—if they notice your presence—but also as an early-warning detection system for problems and issues,” Beck said during the webinar.

For example, a Purdue University police official was able to detect threatening comments aimed at the band section during a football game using the center’s web-based Social Media Analytics and Reporting Toolkit (SMART), Beck said.

“He simply moved police officers,” she said. “It was a really easy thing for him to do. He just reallocates his sources and is potentially preventing any threat from occurring.”

Beck's office helps law enforcement with implementation and training at no cost, although the tools might require additional hardware that the individual agencies would have to purchase. To showcase the available public-safety applications, APCO maintains a website, called AppComm , that posts vetted apps and other features, such as a chat forum. That site, which features more than 180 apps, can be found here .

These new applications can help first responders execute their duties better, but it's important that the public-safety community have a dialogue—one that includes developers—about what their concerns and issues are related to application development, Reddish said.

That conversation should go beyond what the current public-safety needs are and focus on how these drastically different technologies will change the industry, said Brian Shepherd, broadband program manager for the Colorado Governor's Office of Information Technology.

"We're having a really good conversation about the specific applications we need, but we're not really having a conversation about the impact on public safety that it has at a higher level," said Shepherd, another webinar speaker. "The usual question is … 'What services and apps does public safety need?' which is a valid question. We need a lot of things. But the other perspective on the same question is 'How does public safety change, given the power of a dedicated broadband network?'

"We still do things in public safety the way we did 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 years ago, and a lot of it has to do with the fact that we still communicate the same way we did back then."

For example, instead of "calling in" on the radio when officers arrive on the scene, GPS could be used to locate personnel and proactively direct resources, he said.

As for the application needs, Shepherd offered these suggestions: Mission-critical voice on LTE , the use of sensors, tools to analyze the information from sensors, and a method to share medical information through the FirstNet network.

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